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ABSTRACT

Theory-building in any field of inquiry is essential and utilitarian. This paper argues two points: that a concern for theory could redirect some of our typical approaches to rhetorical criticism; and that generic criticism must, by its nature, fully respond to this call for theory-building. Four important areas of rhetorical criticism are discussed: (1) what we choose to study in general, (2) what we choose to study in particular, (3) how we choose to study such things, and (4) what we might do with the results. The ways in which rhetorical genres or speech types are conceptualized and dealt with critically will profoundly affect the value of the resulting theory. Three approaches to rhetorical genres which are available are space-time setting, rhetorical purpose, and ideational thrust. It is concluded that if the theory-based posture were used, it would be possible for rhetorical critics to describe suasive message extensively enough so that intelligent hypotheses would emerge, eventually lend themselves to experimental verification or rejection, and later to theoretical enlargement. (RS)

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THEORY-BUILDING AND RHETORICAL CRITICISM

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THEORY-BUILDING AND RHETORICAL CRITICISM*

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Stemming from what appears to be a puzzling form of academic provincialism, some rhetorical critics in the past have not been overly concerned with collecting and structuring their insights in ways that would lead to the development of refined, probative theories of rhetoric and persuasion. Not often enough have we allowed our conceptualizing of the critical problem, our analysis of the persuasive event in question, and our reporting of our critical insights to be accomplished in the light of a visceral concern for theoretical advancement. The point I wish to make here is that future criticism might profitably ask the kinds of questions and generate the sorts of answers which would lead to theory in the strictest sense of that word. It is in our roles as pre-scientists that rhetorical critics can add substantially to the development and refinement of synthetic, inclusive, and predictive theoretical statements about human persuasion.

I shall not build the case here that theory-building in any field of inquiry is essential and utilitarian. I will take these as givens. What I would like to suggest is that some rhetorical critics in the past have forthrightly, but perhaps unwisely, rejected their obligations to tease theory from their research and that the field of communication is, to that extent, the poorer. Thus, I will argue two points: (1) that a concern for theory could redirect some of our typical approaches to rhetorical criticism, and (2) that generic criticism must, by its nature, fully respond to this call for theory-building.

At no point in my discussion will I attempt to argue that rhetorical criticism, as currently practiced, is inherently deficient. Rather, I will endeavor to point up the advantages of our conceiving and nurturing a new babe in the critical womb--an infant I choose to call the theorist-critic.

I

Were some of us to mimic this wonder-child, this theorist-critic, rhetorical criticism might take new turns in four important areas: (1) what we choose to study in general, (2) what we choose to study in particular, (3) how we choose to study such things, and (4) what we might do with the results. Let us turn to each of these in order.

1. Delimiting our field of inquiry

At the risk of disagreeing with those who participated in the National Conference on Rhetoric sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities in 1970, I do not believe that theories of rhetorical communication are best discovered by unnecessarily muddying the conceptual waters via a cavalier understanding of the term "rhetoric." That is, if we are to develop trenchant insights into rhetoric, it seems that the very last thing we'd want to do is to disagree on the nature of

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the very phenomenon we are investigating. That is, the National Conference on Rhetoric included in its recommendations the following:

> Rhetorical criticism must broaden its scope to examine the full range of rhetorical transactions; that is, informal conversations, group settings, public settings, mass media messages, picketing, sloganeering, chanting, singing, marching, gesturing, ritual, institutional and cultural symbols, cross cultural transactions, and so forth.[1]

While it is somewhat unnerving to speak into the teeth of such an impressive collection of scholars as those who participated in the National Conference, I would suggest that such a broad-based, hardly discrete, operational definition of rhetoric will pose for us serious conceptual problems even before we get around to analyzing rhetorical pursuits. To the extent that we deviate from traditional, commonly shared understandings of what rhetoric is--by including non-social, mechanically mediated, and nonverbal phenomena in the rhetorical mix--we are, to that extent, necessarily forsaking the immediate implementation of the theoretical threads derived in previous studies of human, non-mediated, problematic, verbal interchanges. Thus, while some scholars in the field may well be interested in studying what Larry Rosenfield has termed the "rhetoric of eating," such studies, although tasty to some, could be a might bit unsavory for those of us attempting to dine on theoretically promising rhetorical morsels. Put briefly, if we treat as rhetoric phenomena which only act like rhetoric, then the cogency with which we as a field make theoretical distinctions will be severely opened to question.

It is at this point that we should clearly take hold of a distinction between a theory-based and a theory-free rhetorical critic. My previous remarks are not intended to discourage studies of mediated rhetoric, of the influential effects of sit-ins, or of the communicative value of nonverbal emblems. Clearly, these are all worthwhile studies, ones which bear great tangential relevance to the study of rhetoric as implicitly defined above. My point is simply that such studies must operate from conceptual bases distinct from those which focus on rhetoric as traditionally understood. Such studies must develop their own theoretical frameworks, their own analytical perspectives, their own raison d'etre. Ultimately, such studies will contribute much to a more generalized theory of human influence than that to which rhetorical critics historically have made contributions. In short, the importability of such studies to the Land of Rhetoric is not certain. They, like all conceptual foreigners, must meet the stringent demands of the rhetorical-theorist-turned-customs-inspector.

2. Selecting the rhetorical event

If general theory is to be their goal, theorist-critics might want to begin their studies by examining, in the main, non-idiosyncratic instances of rhetoric. That is, since that theory is best which can account for the greatest number of negative instances, analysts might want to focus their attention on the commonplace (oftentimes mundane) components of rhetorical life. While the Speech Communication Association is encouraging scholars in the field to study a series of rhetorical events which occur but once every four years (that is, the presidential campaign of 1976), too few of us are studying the sorts of public talk which occur day-in and day-out. Presently, we are not studying the rhetoric of plumbers' conventions,

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the proseltyzing which occurs at meetings of Weight Watchers United, the dialectic at the local city council meeting, and the hundreds of thousands of other instances of public rhetoric which affect us all so ubiquitously and so immediately, albeit so ordinarily. While the idiosyncratic rhetorical event (for example, the much heralded Agnew address on the media) is often interesting and newsworthy from a socio-political vantage point, such rhetorical pans have too much theoretical flash in them all too often.

This latter point needs to be sharpened. In many cases, the most devastating and important political or historical event may contain for the theory-based critic, very little of genuine rhetorical value. Of course, Agnew's speech may very well have effected fundamental changes in the relationship between the executive branch of government and the media. The sociological and political dynamics which form the warp and woof of public life in America may well have been sent into a tizzy because Agnew chose to say what he said in the way he chose to say it. But to this date, at least, no one has yet forcefully and convincingly suggested that rhetorical shock-waves began emanating on that fateful day in Des Moines. No one has yet suggested that the way in which Agnew approached his subject was substantially different from the ways in which such rhetorical situations are usually handled. In short, there is as yet no reason to suspect that extant rhetorical theory need be rewritten in the slightest because of Agnew's statement on the media. No one has yet suggested what theoretical value for rhetoric-in-general might be derived from such an over-extended concern with one instance of public communication.

3. Critically analyzing the rhetorical event

If we are to develop rhetorical theory worth its predictive salt, it will be imperative in the future to develop valid and reliable methodologies with which to probe rhetorical transactions. While the words "reliability" and "validity" often stick in the throats of those critics who attempt to utter them, it is nigh impossible to build respectable theory when unanswerable research questions guide our investigations and when we, as critics, insist on hiding our modes of answering these questions from all but Aristotle, Plato, and other assorted rhetorical deities. Because theory necessarily builds upon some convergence or replication of insight, it would behoove some of us to refine our analytical tools so that others in the field can share in the "how" as well as in the "what" of our researches. While we theorist-critics must, and perhaps should, always lie on the lunatic fringe of communication research, this does not mean that we can escape totally our obligation of clearly and explicitly detailing the means by which we derive our answers.

Some of our previous investigations of rhetorical style are cases in point of where theory has been sacrificed to the peculiar intellectual tastes of the critic. Too often we have been treated to self-consciously impressionistic characterizations of a rhetor's language, mindless word-count studied devoid of theoretical impetus, and a bothersome array of reactionary treatises which focus, willy nilly, on the classical figures of speech. Were our collective, conceptual futures to hang on the validity and reliability of such studies, we would surely all dance on the winds, even before the theoretical hangman arrives in town.

4. Interpreting our results

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Perhaps because they are not overly concerned with theories of communication, some rhetorical critics do not feel obligated to interpret their findings in the light of some sort of theoretical mainstream. Rather than viewing, say, the campaign speaking of George McGovern as a case-study in the rhetoric of futility, some critics view McGovern rhetoric qua McGovern rhetoric, as yet another deadening buzz in that great presidential pinball game of life. Because they do not treat McGovern's rhetoric as representative of other members of a rhetorical class which must exert its influence in atmospheres charged with distrust and suspicion, some rhetorical critics obediently detail McGovern's strategies in the 1972 campaign, not because such an investigation promises to bear theoretical fruit for persuasion in general, but because it is an historical obligation the field of communication takes upon itself every four years.

Surely, there is much value in our having an historical record of persuasive events--especially of the important events occuring in presidential campaigns. Yet for all rhetorical scholars to see only historical value in such renderings is surely short-sighted. Indeed, perhaps more than any other political campaign of recent memory, the 1972 presidential race contains a wealth of information for the theory based critic interested in the generic qualities of the rhetorics of in-groups, of out-groups, and of out-groups that want to be in-groups.

II

This latter discussion leads us, briefly, to a type of criticism which seems to hold great promise for the theorist-critic--namely, the criticism of rhetorical genres. Perhaps Northrop Frye has best described the current state of generic criticism when he opines:

> We discover that the critical theory of genres is precisely where Aristotle left it. The very word "genre" sticks out in an English sentence as the unpronounceable and alien thing it is. Most critical efforts to handle /generic criticism/ are chiefly interesting as examples of the psychology of rumor.[2]

Such remarks should give us pause. Yet we dare not spend our time wringing our hands, for Edwin Black has set out a perspective which may well blaze the trail for an exciting brand of critical research. In his book Rhetorical Criticism (New York: 1965), Black offers four assumptions about rhetoric which impinge directly on generic criticism. They are:

1. There are a limited number of situations in which a rhetor can find himself.

2. There are a limited number of ways in which a rhetor can and will respond rhetorically.

3. The recurrence through time of such rhetorical situations will provide us with information about the rhetorical responses available in such situations.

4. Rhetorical discourses will "cluster" on the basis of similar responses to similar situations.[3]

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Obviously, theorist-critics should be quickly setting about the tasks of specifying the situations, the typical responses, and the congregations of discourses of which Black speaks. Exactly how the theorist-critic should proceed, however, is not so easily discovered. That is, the ways in which rhetorical genres or speech types are conceptualized and dealt with critically will profoundly affect the value of the resulting theory.

Presently, at least three approaches to rhetorical genres are available. These include characterizations of rhetorical transactions by:

1. Space-time setting--For example, Aristotle's forensic, epideictic, and deliberative typologies, as well as the more contemporary designations of lecturing, preaching, political conventioneering, and so forth.

2. Rhetorical purpose--That is, speeches to inform, to agitate, to convince, to exhort, to entertain, etc., and other apparent types of discourse distinguished by the instrumental and consummatory goals of the rhetor.

3. Ideational thrust--Perhaps the most common, contemporary method of isolating speech types, this approach results in such designations as the rhetoric of black power, the rhetoric of womens' rights, the rhetoric of consummerism, and so forth.

These, as well as other generic approaches, have a number of limitations when viewed through the highly conservative lenses of theory construction. It could be argued, for example, that no necessary relationship exists between when/where an utterance is made and the resulting characteristics of rhetoric produced under such constraints of space and time. It could also be established, and surely has been, that even though two speakers may have similar rhetorical intent that the rhetoric they eventually produce may bear none or only faint resemblence. Furthermore, it seems that the "rhetorics" (that is, rhetorical genres) of womens' liberation and black activism are not rhetorics at all, but more appropriately might be termed dialectics, since only idea and topic (which are but two of many rhetorical variables) are shared significantly by representatives of such rhetorical classes in many cases.

In short, all three approaches to genre have shortcomings; they are what E. D. Hirsch would call designations of "extrinsic genres," genres which have heuristic value but ones which do not fully come to grips with the subtlety and complexity of the phenomena constitutive of rhetorical transactions.[4]

A more appropriate perspective is hinted at, but not fully developed, in an excellent essay on generic constraints and the rhetorical situation by Kathleen Jamieson.[5] There, Jamieson urges that situational variables, as well as the characteristics of messages, be considered when isolating and analyzing rhetorical types. Extending Jamieson's theoretical rationale a bit, we might conceive of a rhetorical genre (i.e., a rhetoric) as that which delimits similar rhetorical

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responses made by similar speakers to similar audiences bound by similar relational characteristics in similar speech settings. So conceived, rhetorical genres embody common message-makings shared by interactants in common situations, situations not necessarily centering on common ideational and topical foci. Rhetorical genres define not only patterned verbal characteristics, but also designate the nature of the rhetorical personnel as well as the psycho-social environments in which they interact. Because rhetoric, by its very nature, is transactional; because rhetoric involves not only verbal phenomena but also the persons who utilize them; and because rhetoric is method as well as content, the isolation of rhetorical genres cannot be accomplished solely via a simplistic sort of verbal or geographical or temporal or topical pattern-seeking.

An example of the foregoing set of propositions seems to demand itself. Inaugural addresses do not constitute a rhetorical genre solely because political thematics recur in four year intervals. They constitute a rhetorical genre because the system of rhetorical elements--the spokesmen and the settings and the sayings--bear marked resemblence to their historical counterparts. Were this not so, a reprobate could deliver an "inaugural address" by simply mouthing nationalistic preachments whenever and wherever the rhetorical impulse and the torrents of Thunderbird should be interlaced within him. We do not, knowingly at least, allow ourselves to be inaugurated by reprobates, nor do we permit our national inaugurating to be accomplished in Springfield, Illinois every seven years. Too, we as listeners constrain our inaugurators in such ways that gasoline prices, Watergates, feminists, egg plants, streakers, and other forms of mundanity do not find their ways into our quaint form of quadrennial oratory. Furthermore, in the playing out of our four-year political ritual, we as citizens take pains to insure that the new chief executive does not mount his rhetorical olympus in the presence of a solitary peanut vendor from Asbury Park. In short, inaugural addresses are distinctive rhetorical phenomena because the system of relationships existing among transactors and that which they transacted in 1974 bore marked similarity to the system of persons, events, settings, and messages conjoined four years earlier.

The implications for the theory-building rhetorical critic seem clear. Following Black's lead, we might well attend to rhetorical systems which perseverate, for in such perseverations lie the glimmerings of rhetorical genres, and in such rhetorical genres lie the building blocks of theory necessary to explain the over-arching forms which rhetoric-in-general takes in everyday public life. By focusing on archetypal or paradigmatic rhetorical transactions, the critic might well bite off a theoretical piece of what Wayne Booth has termed a knowledge most worth having.

III

By way of conclusion, we might suggest that the theorist-critic could profit by remembering the four critical options suggested by Thonssen and Baird in Speech Criticism.[6] There, they suggest that rhetorical criticism comes in four flavors. Impressionistic criticism revolves around data-poor evaluation--I like it or I don't like it. This is something that Edwin Black has described as the process by which the critic reports the state of his glands.[7] Analytic criticism, on the other hand, involves focusing great scrutiny on the message itself without paying heed to the personal and situational features which make rhetoric rhetorical. A

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third brand of critical study is termed Synthetic criticism by Thonssen and Baird. Here the critic proceeds in a rigorous, descriptive fashion, attempting to explicate the several forces--personal, ideational, stylistic, structural, and situational--which have combined to form rhetorical engagement. Most critics go one step further, of course, in order to produce "complete" criticism. Judicial criticism, in the Thonssen and Baird taxonomy, involves evaluating a rhetorical offering against some proffered standard or groupings of standards--those of effectiveness, beauty, moral worth, and so forth.

In the past, many scholars have unservingly assumed that criticism must involve just such renderings of informed judgments. At the socio-philosophical end of the continuum, for example, Karlyn Campbell[8] has argued that criticism which eschews considerations of "truth" and "ethical presuppositions" are at best suspect and, at worst, capable of undermining the critic's moral obligation. It is for these and other reasons that Campbell can find speeches by Richard Nixon to be lacking, despite the fact that said speeches resonated strongly to the audiences for whom they were designed.

While it may seem cowardly to do so, I would like to suggest that some critics, in their headlong rush to pass judgment, do so at the risk of spending their time by rendering precise rhetorical description. I would also suggest that such critics sometimes tell us a good deal more about themselves than they do about the rhetoric they purport to evaluate. I would suggest, further, that the criticism of tomorrow might be best served by taking the somewhat reactionary step of returning to a synthetic approach--one which centers on the gathering and digesting of rhetorical facts. Were he to take such a turn, the rhetorical critic in the future might better see himself as a sort of sociologist of persuasion, rather than as a rhetorical version of Judith Crist. Thus cloaked in the antiseptic garb of empirical assumptions, theorist-critics may be in positions to do little for the cause of justice-in-our-times but could, perhaps, illuminate certain characteristics of situations and messages which are distinctively rhetorical.

Were <u>some</u> of us, at least, to assume this descriptive, theory-based posture (thereby resisting the rather heady atmosphere of premature critical evaluation), it would be possible for rhetorical critics to describe suasory messages extensively enough so that intelligent hypotheses would emerge, eventually lend themselves to experimental verification or rejection, and, later, to theoretical enlargement. Admittedly, such a shot-gun marriage of critic and scientist, of both of C. P. Snow's cultures, may eventually terminate in a type of intellectual's divorce court. Still, were some critics and behavioral researchers to be conjoined symbiotically, then perhaps we as a field could learn much about the nature of human discourse and of social responses thereunto.

FOOTNOTES

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[1]Lloyd F. Bitzer and Edwin Black (eds.), The Prospect of Rhetoric (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: 1971), p. 225.

[2]Anatomy of Criticism (New York: 1957), p. 13.

[3]Rhetorical Criticism (New York: 1965), pp. 133-134.

[4]See E. D. Kirsch, Validity in Interpretation (New Haven: 1967), p. 111.

[5]"Generic Constraints and the Rhetorical Situation," Philosophy and Rhetoric, 6 (Summer, 1973), pp. 162-170.

[6](New York: 1948). See pp. 17-18.

[7]Rhetorical Criticism, p. 7.

[8]Critiques of Contemporary Rhetoric (Belmont, Cal., 1972).